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ABSTRACT

The Introductory Writing Programs developed for freshman students at Northeastern University are described in this document. The introduction outlines the programs' philosophy, which is based on the notion that all writers are developing writers regardless of their ability. The second section looks at how students are placed in either Freshman English I or the two-semester Fundamentals of Writing and Intensive Writing, and the types of grades students receive for the courses. The third section mentions additional support systems, including in-class tutoring, writing workshops, traveling tutors, and one-on-one tutors in the Writing Center. The fourth section outlines the assumptions on which the program is based, staff development activities, and a collaborative grading exercise; while the fifth section details the goals of the program. The Middle Year writing course required of upper level students is discussed in the last two sections. (Seven references are included.) (JC)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF DEVELOPING WRITERS: THE INTRODUCTORY WRITING PROGRAMS AT NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

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The Introductory Writing Programs developed for freshman students at Northeastern University recognize that all students are developing writers, and that all writers develop at different rates. One of the major advantages of our program is that students are not labeled as "remedial" or "developmental" or in any way singled out as less able to perform writing tasks. Students who have received such labels grow to see themselves as inherently incapable of writing well. (The "I'm not too good at English" syndrome--"I never liked to write. I dunno why, I just don't." Well, we wouldn't like it, either, if someone labeled us remedial or developmental.) This labeling impedes learning, and prevents students from developing the confidence necessary to write well.

Our Introductory Writing Programs stress the need for practice in writing: "writers learn to write by writing" (Bullock 7). One fundamental need of all writers is that of time. By allowing student writers the time they need, we are simply recognizing a fact about the writing process: writing is individual, and individual writers need different things at different times. We are all, in fact, developing writers at whatever level we happen to be.

All of our writing classes are conference based and provide as much individual instruction as possible. We rely heavily on the ideas of Donald Murray (A Writer Teaches Writing) and others

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such as Thomas Carnecelli and Kenneth Bruffee in arranging individual student conferences and collaborative learning in peer groups. Described here are our writing programs and support systems for these programs.

A DESCRIPTION OF OUR INTRODUCTORY WRITING PROGRAM

Most of the 4,000 freshman students coming into Northeastern University's Introductory Writing Programs are placed into Freshman English I, although some are placed into Fundamentals of English (a two-quarter equivalent of Freshman English I). SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) verbal scores and other admissions indicators, such as school grades, help determine placement. Placement exams were abolished two years ago in favor of a system that allows student writing to be viewed over time, yielding a more accurate assessment. The concept of a written exam where students are expected to "get it right" the first time runs counter to everything we know about the writing process. "As Shaughnessy points out, the beginner thinks only amateurs--never accomplished writers--change things" (Wiener 88). We adopt beginners' thinking when we demand that students produce a finished product at the first try under what for many of them is a highly stressful situation.

Students who enter the university with low SAT scores and low admissions indicators are placed into a two-quarter sequence of writing: Fundamentals of Writing and Intensive Writing. Students receive a pass/fail grade for the first course and a letter grade for the second. Both courses carry full credit.

However, SAT verbal scores are not always accurate in determining who will be successful in writing and who will need

more help. We have, therefore, built into the system a safety valve for students who find themselves in Freshman English I under-prepared to do the work. For such students, who may make progress during the term, but not enough to earn a grade of at least a "C," an alternative is available: an "S" grade rather than a letter grade. This grade indicates they have passed the course, but they need another quarter of writing (Intensive Writing) before moving into Freshman English II.

These students are not "remedial," nor are they "developmental." They simply need more practice writing. Therefore, rather than assess their work and pass them on to Freshman English II, where they will move into writing about literature and will be expected to tackle more challenging types of academic writing, they are given an "S" grade. Once these students have fulfilled the two-course sequence a grade assigned. The "S" grade is not punitive. It does not affect their overall cumulative average and the students are given full credit for the course.

This option increases the opportunity for students who need extra help in writing to get it without being penalized by receiving a poor grade. Offering an alternative--a passing grade of "S" and an extra quarter of writing--frees the student from the burden of having to perform at levels for which he or she is not yet prepared. It also helps build integrity into the process of teaching writing by removing some of the temptation to inflate grades. ("She's a nice kid and she's worked hard--maybe she should get a C-" when in fact the student is not performing at that level. It's a temptation we've all faced as writing

teachers, but to give in to it does not serve the student well.)

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

In-Class Tutoring

Class size for Fundamentals of Writing and for Intensive Writing is kept small--17 students is the limit, with most classes averaging between 12 and 15. This limit insures greater individual attention for each student, allowing writing teachers to "provide guidance during the process" of writing (Lauer 54). In addition, each Fundamentals and each Intensive Writing class is assigned an in-class tutor from the Writing Center to work with students once a week in class on their writing. All in-class tutors are experienced T.A.'s from the English Department who have been trained in the tutoring and teaching of writing. It is important that only seasoned tutors are attached to these classes, for they need to be able to assess writing and help students develop strategies quickly. Most often they work with 8 or more students in an hour.

The possibilities for in-class activities are as varied as the instructors. There are brief one-to-one conferences with half or more of the class, longer one-to-one conferences with one or two students who need a lot of extra help, and group writing activities.

Writing Workshops

Class size for Freshman English I is at 25 slightly larger than for the other writing courses. During the third week of the quarter--long enough for Freshman English I teachers to see several pieces of student writing in progress--students who appear to be in need of additional help are enrolled in special

Writing Center Workshops.

Each workshop has no more than 5 students and meets for an hour each week in addition to class time. We have found that of the students assigned to workshops, 70 per cent are able to perform at a grade level of at least a "C" by the end of the quarter (Goggin 5). They are then enrolled in Freshman English II rather than Intensive Writing. "Of all the students who failed Freshman English I, 77 per cent have been referred to a writing workshop but never enrolled in one"(Goggin 5).

Writing Center Workshops are taught by teaching assistants who have been trained in teaching writing. The workshops are an obvious advantage to the students enrolled, but they also help provide teaching opportunities for new teachers of composition, using the conference method.

Traveling Tutors

A constant problem for teachers of writing, particularly at a large university, is class size. To help instructors provide individual attention to student writers as they work, we have instituted a "Traveling Tutor" program. This allows instructors to arrange for a Writing Center tutor to come to class to help with special activities, trips to the library, or in-class conferences.

The program has been well received by teachers, tutors, and students. Again, in addition to increasing the opportunities for individual attention for students, the program also provides exposure to a wide range of teaching styles for the new teachers of composition who serve as tutors.

One-to-One Tutoring in the Writing Center

In addition to the Writing Center programs described above, one-on-one tutoring sessions are available in the Writing Center to all students free of charge. They may come on their own and sign up for a tutor, or they may be referred by an instructor. HOW DOES ALL THIS WORK?

In the words of David Bartholomae, "a program should base itself on a coherent approach to teaching, one that is, itself based on a set of beliefs about what writing is and why a student should do it"(2). A strong writing program must be built on a strong pedagogy. The underlying assumptions of Northeastern's Introductory Writing Programs are:

1) writing is a process;
2) writing is individual;
3) developing writers need space and time to write under the care of a writing "coach" who supplies feedback and encouragement for student writers to learn on their own (Bullock 1-4).

It is understood that those who teach in the program share these assumptions about writing and about how best to meet the needs of developing writers. Staff meetings are held regularly to share activities that have worked in class, to keep up on changing policies and work out solutions to common problems that might arise. We also try to arrange casual social events (brown bag lunches, for example) so we can get together just for fun--an attempt at building community among teaching staff--but given teaching loads and differing schedules, this has been less successful than we would like.

A quarterly newsletter is published, inviting articles from the faculty of the Introductory Writing Programs. It serves as a vehicle for communication among a large and scattered faculty, (about 100 instructors, including teaching assistants, full- and part-timers) and offers on-going professional development with the inclusion of reprinted professional articles that examine current issues in the field of composition studies. Student essays make their way into the newsletter as well--a way to share the fruits of a writing program at its best.

Faculty Development Workshops

This year, all instructors who teach in the programs are asked to attend a two-day Faculty Development Workshop: Tutoring and Teaching Writing prior to the first class meeting. This workshop covers the theoretical base for the programs as well as the practical methods of implementing them. For new instructors, these workshops provide an orientation; for others, the workshops supply an opportunity for professional development. It gives all participants a chance to meet and build a community.

Professional Development Workshops for T.A.'s

Two years ago we developed a comprehensive training program for teaching assistants. All T.A.'s in The English Department participate in Professional Development Workshops in Tutoring and Teaching Writing during their first two quarters as part of their assistantship. These workshops are designed to prepare T.A.'s for tutoring and teaching writing, make them aware of their own writing process, acquaint them with current research and practices in the teaching of writing and provide them with practical suggestions as well as practice in the tutoring and

teaching of writing.

Ideal Syllabus

Each instructor is supplied with a copy of the program's "Ideal Syllabus," which outlines the assumptions underlying our work and offers a procedure for the first week of class. This ensures a uniform approach, important during the first few class meetings when students are still arranging their schedules. If a student must withdraw from one section and join a different one, the work he did will be in sync with the other students in the new section. This is an obvious advantage to both student and instructor.

Collaborative Grading

All instructors participate in a collaborative grading exercise each quarter. This exercise helps to ensure uniform standards of grading. It provides students with feedback from a writing teacher other than their own, and it gives teachers an opportunity to discuss their grading practices with colleagues. They are forced to think about what they are doing, and why, and in return they feel support when they realize their grade assessments are (in more than 90 per cent of the cases) equal to or within a close range of those of other writing teachers (Ockerstrom 5).

Most importantly, students receive the comments of another, more removed reader--a logical part of the writing process, as students write first for themselves and those around them, and finally for readers they may never meet.

WHAT ARE OUR GOALS FOR STUDENT WRITERS?

By the time students have completed Freshman English I or

the two-course equivalent, they should:

1) understand that writing is a process and it is different for each writer and for each writing assignment;

2) have a set of invention, drafting, revising, editing and proofreading strategies that they can then take with them to other, more demanding writing tasks;

3) understand that they have a voice that changes with each piece of writing;

4) be aware of an audience;

5) be able to read their own writing and the writing of their peers critically;

6) have confidence in their ability to perform writing tasks.

This does not mean that all students can do all of these things after completing our courses. What it does mean is that most students begin to realize that they have something to say and that that something is worth saying. They begin to trust their own authority.

By using the conference method and by supplying opportunities for reader response from peers as well as instructors, students' own writing becomes the focus of the course. By not having every error pointed out to them, they become more concerned with what they have to say than with superficial grammatical "correctness" (Judy 42). They are empowered to speak. Rather than asking, "Is my paper correct?" they begin to ask, "How does my writing come across to an audience?" and "What does the reader need here?" They may never have thought about these questions before, but they talk about

"the reader" by the time they finish our courses, just as they talk freely about their own purposes in the writing.

BEYOND FRESHMAN ENGLISH

Students at Northeastern have not seen the last of the English Department when they complete their Freshman English requirement. Two years later, they make their way back into a required upper level writing course: the Middler Year Writing Requirement. Students are given a choice among several types of writing courses (including intermediate writing, technical writing, business writing, or a one-credit Writing Workshop). All courses are conference based and all teach writing process--a continuation of instruction in freshman writing courses, but designed to meet the needs of older developing writers.

All students, including transfer students who may have taken writing courses elsewhere, must fulfill this writing requirement at Northeastern.

The same kinds of support systems that are available to freshman are available to middler year students: one-on-one tutoring in the Writing Center, individual conferences with their instructors, in-class tutors trained in teaching writing who are assigned to sections to allow for more opportunity for individual instruction. The Writing Workshops are sometimes "attached" to a content course in the students' field, allowing for "ways in which teachers can cooperate in cross-disciplinary efforts to improve student writing" (Weiss 134).

A unique feature of the middler year writing courses is publication: all students in the courses publish a final paper in a bound course booklet, paid for with a $10.00 lab fee. Each

student receives a copy of the publication. Student response to this course requirement has been positive. Some students have taken the booklet with them to job interviews so prospective employees can see samples of their writing.

CONCLUSION

All of these courses at Northeastern are structured to allow intervention during the writing process, when writers most need intervention (Lauer 64). The programs are built on a strong pedagogy shown by research to meet the needs of developing writers. After students have completed our writing programs and are on their way to the careers they have chosen, we feel confident that they are able to approach the writing tasks required of them with less anxiety and more success because of their experience in the Introductory Writing Programs and the Middler Year Writing Requirement.

In the words of one student, "This class just wasn't like an English class." We consider that response a sign that the program is succeeding.

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